

'TORNADO!'

FAMILIAR CRY BECKONS CAP AIR, GROUND CREWS TO ACTION

In the wake of a torrent of twisters, from Wisconsin,
Arkansas and Alabama and points inbetween,
the Civil Air Patrol went to work in at
least nine states, assisting their
communities with aerial
photography,
damage
assessment
and ground
cleanup.

NOAA Photo Library, NOAA
Central Library, OAR/ERL/National Severe Storms
Laboratory (NSSL)

CAP takes meteorologists sky high

By Neil Probst

Photo by 1st Lt. Stephan Cavarra, Georgia Wing



A Georgia Wing aircrew from Atlanta Senior Squadron 1 flies above downtown Atlanta after a tornado struck the Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel, the cylindrical building at left, as well the CNN center and the Georgia Dome. Georgia Wing members shot about 500 images of damage in downtown Atlanta and nearby Bartow County, then sent the photography to the Georgia Emergency Management Agency, Georgia Power, the Bartow County Emergency Management Agency and the Georgia Governor's Office.



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Weather scientists use sophisticated technology, like Doppler radar and other high-tech equipment, to forecast and analyze weather events.

But even the fanciest equipment can't assess the destruction caused by a tornado.

To really witness a twister's wrath, one's best view is from above. This reality is sending more and more meteorologists aloft in CAP Cessnas after tornadoes strike communities.

And strike they have: Since January, estimates put the number of tornado touchdowns in the U.S. at about 500.

Civil Air Patrol assisted with aerial photography and damage assessment of dozens of these twisters, from Wisconsin, Arkansas and Alabama and innumerable points inbetween.

In Arkansas, Little Rock-based National Weather Service meteorologist John Lewis took off in a CAP Cessna 182 flown by Lt. Col. Terry Thompson.

"In a case like this, a lot is riding on this flight," said Lewis.

A 123-MILE TORNADO TRACK

Thompson lifted Lewis and another NWS meteorologist above the track of a tornado that struck northwest Arkansas.

"Usually it's a three- to four-hour flight. The mission that day was to find out if it was a continuous path," he said.

Surely not, the trio thought when they took off. But Thompson kept flying and flying and flying. And Lewis kept looking and looking at the same tornado track that went 123 miles.

It was historic — the longest track in Arkansas since 1950 and one of the longest ever recorded in U.S. meteorological history, Lewis said.

They couldn't have detected it from the ground, he emphasized.

In Illinois, meteorologist Jim Allsopp took off with CAP pilot Lt. Col. Lou Wipotnik and Maj. Bob Williams to photograph the destruction in north Illinois for Allsopp's Romeoville office in north Illinois.

The dual experience of giving Allsopp a bird's-eye view and providing photographs the weather service posted on its Web site thrilled the aircrew.

"It makes you feel proud you're able to serve the communities and our country doing things like that. That's what we're in business for," said Wipotnik.

Wisconsin aircrews flew similar missions, and their photographs turned up at the NWS' Sullivan office Web site.

Meteorologist-in-charge Ken Rizzo wrote CAP members an e-mail expressing thanks for their images.

"They verified what we were seeing with our ground survey and provided great information concerning the exact path," Rizzo's e-mail to Lt. Col. Chris Trossen stated. "I want to personally thank you and the CAP for the service you provided. One picture from the air is worth a thousand on the ground when it comes to weather damage surveys," he wrote.

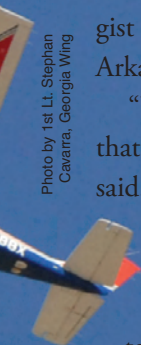
TORMENTED TENNESSEE

In Tennessee, which several twisters chose as a target for their fury, members found themselves performing essentially any mission under the sun.

There, too, the National Weather Service requested a CAP flight to view a tornado track.

Tennessee Wing Commander Col. Barry Melton said the track was so long that Tennessee members first flew

Photo by 1st Lt. Stephan Cavarra, Georgia Wing



A Wisconsin Wing aircrew photographed a home damaged by a tornado that swept through Kenosha in the southeast corner of the state. Aircrews shot dozens of photographs, then shipped them to the National Weather Service in Wisconsin, which posted the images on its Web site.

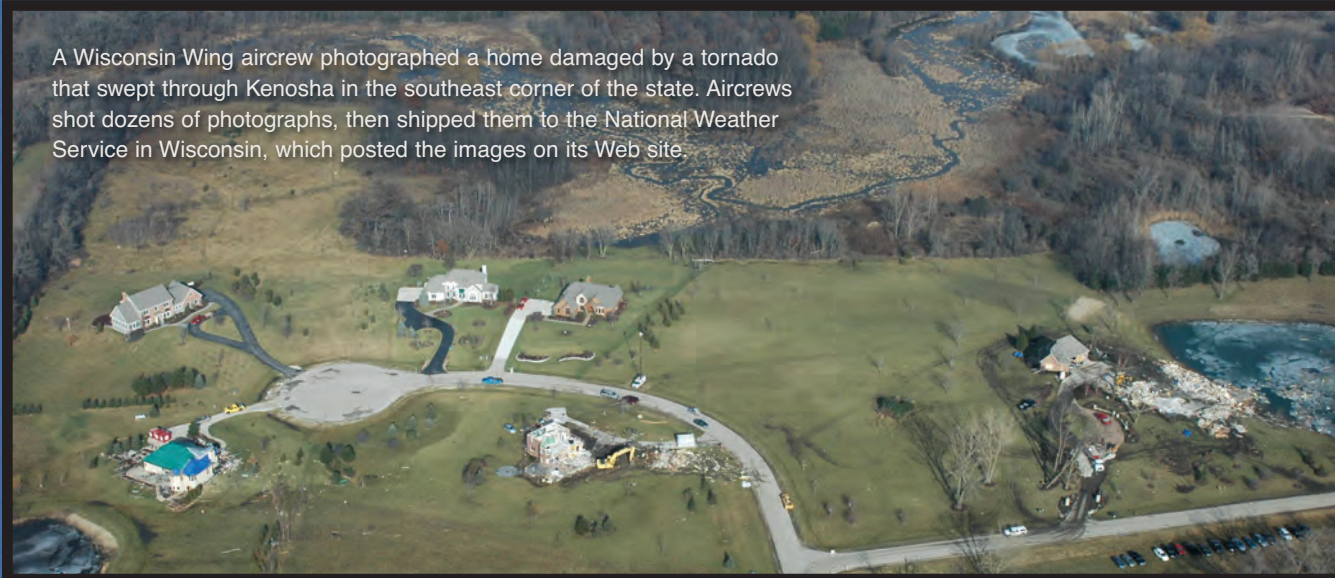


Photo by St. Mbr. Mark Lay, Wisconsin Wing



An Alabama Wing aerial photo shows some of the devastation suffered in Prattville, site of a recent tornado. Two satellite-transmitted digital imaging system crews from Tuscaloosa and Birmingham composite squadrons flew missions in support of the Alabama Emergency Management Agency, Department of Homeland Security and other organizations.

Morristown NWS meteorologist Howard Waldron to northeast Mississippi.

While the CAP aircrew refueled its Cessna, Mississippi Wing Commander Col. Tim Carroll took Waldron for a ground tour of the damage.

When Waldron launched with CAP members, the aircrew found that the tornado track competed with the Arkansas tornado's for length.

"We actually started in the Mississippi Wing and ended up in the Kentucky Wing," Melton said.

This was just the beginning. Later that day, the wing received a request from 1st Air Force to take aerial photography of about 40 other damage sites, Melton said.

The wing supplied the photos that were taken to 1st Air Force and to the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency, which later asked for continued assistance with ground cleanup.

While senior members provided strong assistance in the air, cadets helped on the ground by unloading trucks of bottled water and hygiene items for distribution to needy residents.

Like CAP members in all affected states, volunteers in Tennessee sacrificed their own time and money to assist during the day, as well as nights and weekends.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

While CAP members assessed damage from Milwaukee to Atlanta, where tornadoes ravaged downtown buildings like the Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel, CAP Interim National Commander Brig. Gen. Amy Courter found herself amid destruction in Alabama.

Courter was at CAP National Headquarters at

Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery leading a senior commander strategic planning weekend when a tornado struck nearby Prattville.

It was déjà vu for Courter, who was in Kalamazoo, Mich., in 1980 when a tornado killed five in her community. With her law enforcement and CAP training, she was called upon to engage in disaster relief work for days following that event.

This time, Courter and CAP members drove to Prattville with hot pasta, coffee and hot chocolate while aircrews took photos for the Alabama Emergency Management Agency.

“We walked up and down streets and engaged in conversations with people,” said Courter.

“We were outside one of the damaged homes when we looked up — and you know everything is pretty quiet when there is no power — we looked up and saw the CAP plane flying its pattern and capturing the aerial photography,” Courter said.

“I remember stopping everything else — becoming fully engaged in watching our plane serving the citizens of the Prattville community. It was the one time that day where we could all look up and smile,” she said. ▲

Multistate CAP Effort

Tornadoes from the Great Lakes Region states to the Southeast put CAP aircrews and ground teams to work recently. Members in the following states gave assistance to torn communities.

Alabama:

After tornadoes struck Lawrence and Jackson counties in north Alabama, aircrews flew approximately 10 hours of damage assessment and aerial photography missions for numerous agencies, including the state Department of Homeland Security’s Virtual Alabama project.

Arkansas:

The Arkansas Wing flew 18 sorties at the request of state and federal agencies after tornadoes tore through the northern part of the state. Aircrews photographed damage at numerous sites, including Little Rock Air Force Base.

Georgia:

State Rep. Barry Loudermilk of Georgia, also a CAP member, helped CAP ground crews get relief supplies into Bartow County, while aircrews photographed the disaster area.

Kentucky:

CAP Maj. James McFarland flew two National Weather Service meteorologists on a three-hour tornado damage survey.

Mississippi:

Aircrews flew nearly three hours of aerial imagery missions in Lafayette County for the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency.

Missouri:

Three Missouri Wing aircraft flew 10 hours for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration after tornadoes damaged homes and businesses in the southwest part of the state.

Wisconsin:

The National Weather Service office in Milwaukee posted a variety of Civil Air Patrol aerial photographs on its Web site to illustrate the damage caused by tornadoes that tore through southeastern Wisconsin, destroying more than 50 homes.

Sources: WIMRS (CAP’s Web Mission Information Reporting System), media reports and CAP News Online.